

“Basic Truth” series, #4

Understanding Providence (part 1)¹

By Daryl Wingerd

Meticulous Providence

“Providence” is a theological term describing God’s ruling and governing of His creation. “Meticulous” providence depicts God as ordering and directing *everything*—every detail in the universe. In Ephesians 1:11 we are told that God “works *all things* according to the counsel of His will.” And consider the words of Romans 11:36: “For of Him and through Him and to Him are *all things*, to whom be glory forever. Amen” (emphasis added in each case).

What relationship does God have to the good things that happen? What about the multitudes of seemingly insignificant things? What about disasters, or tragic events? What about *sin*? Does the Bible portray God merely as an all-knowing and all-powerful *responder* to otherwise natural or human events? Or is He shown to be the sovereign Designer of all things?

Every Good Thing

Though Paul instructed the Philippians to work out their own salvation, He assured them of God’s providence when he added that “it is God who works in you, both to will and to do for His good pleasure” (Phil. 2:12-13). Though we “press toward the goal” of perfection as Paul did (Phil. 3:14), we understand that it is God who has *begun* and will *complete* the good work in us (Phil. 1:6;). We are not passive, but our efforts are the work of God’s providence from beginning to end.

“Insignificant,” or “Natural” Occurrences

In teaching His followers not to be fearful about persecution or death, Jesus said, “Are not two sparrows sold for a cent? And yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father” (Matt. 10:29). Notice that Jesus did not say, “apart from your Father’s *knowledge*.” He was not merely saying that God *knows* when a sparrow falls. He was saying that even something as seemingly insignificant as the death of a sparrow is according to God’s decree and purpose. Also, consider how common it is to see animals searching for their own food. Is God involved even in this? The Bible tells us that He is—that every creature receives its food from Him (Ps. 104:27-28; 145:15-16; 147:9).

Remember that it is God who “gives to all life, breath, and all things (Acts 17:25).

Destructive or Tragic Events

When a pilot loses control of an airplane and hundreds of people are killed, are we supposed to believe such a tragic accident happened according to the counsel of God’s will? When an earthquake kills thousands of people, is it really appropriate to say that it happened according to God’s purpose? What about destructive storms? What about devastating droughts that bring famine? Aren’t these events just “accidents” or “natural occurrences”?

To answer these questions biblically, consider the following passages: “I am the Lord, and there is no other; I form the light and create darkness. I make peace and create calamity; I, the Lord, do all these things” (Is. 45:6-7). “Is it not from the mouth of the Most High that woe and well-being proceed?” (Lam. 3:37-38). “Whatever the Lord pleases, He does, in heaven and in earth. He causes the vapors to ascend from the ends of the earth; He makes lightening for the rain; He brings the wind out of His treasuries” (Psalm 135:6-7). “Moreover, He called for a famine in the land; He destroyed all the provision of bread” (Psalm 105:16).

Clearly, in each of these passages, God is not merely shown to be the One who *responds* to tragedies and brings good out of them. He is the One who causes them to occur, all for His own purpose. And this should bring great comfort, because no matter what (or who) we see as their ultimate cause, tragedies do happen. How much better to understand that even in our greatest losses and most unbearable pain, God has a good purpose.

Preview of part 2: If God really works *everything* according to the counsel of His will, does this mean that even sinful actions are according to His decree and purpose? If this is the case, how can men be held responsible for their actions? And if God uses sinful behavior to accomplish His purpose, how can He be morally blameless? In the next insert, we will address this difficult issue. We will also discuss the benefits of God’s providence for Christians, and the ultimate design of God’s providence—to glorify Himself.

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“Basic Truth” series, #4 (cont.)

Understanding Providence (part 2)¹

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We left you last time with this question: Does God’s providential control of all events even include the sinful actions of people?

We first need to affirm what the Bible says about the character of God. God is perfectly good. He is perfectly and infinitely holy, righteous, and just (Ps. 92:15; Rom. 9:14). We must never blame God, or ascribe evil to Him as if He were guilty of it, or as if He tempts men to sin (cf. James 1:13). And in one sense, the sinful actions of men are *not* according to God’s will. When men sin, they violate God’s law. Joseph’s brothers sinned when they sold him to slave traders. Pharaoh sinned when he disobeyed God. Judas sinned when he betrayed Christ. The Pharisees, Pilate, and the Roman soldiers sinned when they conspired to murder Jesus. Each of these men acted in direct opposition to God’s will in the sense that sin is always contrary to God’s moral standard.

But the Bible tells us just as plainly that in another sense, each of these men was *serv*ing God—carrying out His will perfectly. In violating His divine moral standard, they accomplished *His* providential purpose (Regarding Joseph’s brothers, cf. Gen. 45:5-7; 50:19-20. Regarding Pharaoh, cf. Ex 4:21; 7:2-5; 9:16; Prov. 21:1; Rom. 9:14-23. Regarding the murder of Christ, cf. Is. 53:10; Acts 4:27-28).

It is difficult for us to understand how a man can accomplish God’s purpose through sinful behavior, and then be held responsible for his sin. How can this be right? The question has been asked, and answered before. In Romans 9, Paul raises this question after a discussion of God’s sovereignty concerning the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart: “You will say to me then, Why does He still find fault? For who has resisted His will?” (Rom. 9:17-19).

These two questions could be stated like this: “If God’s will is accomplished through the sinful behavior of men, why does He still hold them responsible for their sin? After all, isn’t it impossible for anyone to resist God’s eternal purpose? Here is Paul’s answer to that question: “But indeed, O man, who are you to reply against God? Will the thing formed say to him who formed it, “Why have you made me like this?” Does not the potter have power over the clay, from the same lump to make one vessel for honor and another for dishonor?” (vv. 20-21). Paul makes no attempt to make this difficult truth easier to swallow. He simply tells us that it is not our place to question God. He basically says, “Stop telling God what He may or may not do with *His* clay!”

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There is one more question we are tempted to ask: *How* does God accomplish all of this? More specifically, How does He do it while remaining untainted by sin Himself? Frankly, we do not know. We have not been given this knowledge in the Scriptures. Rather than speculating, we simply rest assured, based on the consistent testimony of God’s Word, that God remains morally blameless, while His human instruments bear the full weight of responsibility for their sins. “Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out” (Rom. 11:33).

All for Our Good

Romans 8:28-39 is the Christian’s precious jewel in understanding God’s providence. The passage begins: “And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose” (v. 28, NASB). For the Christian, the knowledge of God’s providential ordering and directing of every event, decision, and action, brings great peace. Whatever pain we feel, whatever difficulties we face, whatever persecution we endure, whatever losses we mourn, we have hope in the promise that it is all working together in God’s providence for our good.

All for His Glory

Pharaoh’s life did not serve to glorify God for His mercy, but it did for His wrath and power. Paul’s life did not serve to glorify God for His justice and wrath, but it did for His grace and mercy. And so it is, one way or the other, with every person. Every believer has been predestined to adoption as God’s child, according to the good pleasure of His will, “to the praise of the glory of His grace” (Eph. 1:5-6). On the other hand, concerning the destruction of the wicked city of Sidon the Lord declares: “Behold, I am against you, O Sidon; I will be glorified in your midst; and they shall know that I am the Lord, when I execute judgments in her, and am hallowed in her (Ez. 28:22).

While a beautiful sunset serves to glorify God for His ability to create and display incredible beauty, a hurricane serves to glorify Him for His awesome power and the destructive capability of His wrath. “For of Him, and through Him, and to Him are all things, to whom be glory forever. Amen” (Rom. 11:36).

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